Musical Narratology: A Theoretical Outline

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Early in the mock dedication to Lord Byron's comic epic *Don Juan*, the raconteurish author/narrator slips in a footnote about a rhyming contest between Ben Jonson and one John Sylvester:

> [Sylvester] challenged [Jonson] to rhyme with—
> 'I, John Sylvester,
> Lay with your sister.'
> Jonson answered — 'I, Ben Jonson, lay with your wife.'
> Sylvester answered — 'That is not rhyme.' 'No,' said Ben Jonson; 'but it is *true*.'[1]

Interestingly, Byron tells this anecdote to make a point, not about sex, but about narrative—though the overlap of terms is no accident. Narrative, he suggests, begins in infidelity; narrative abrogates form, social or esthetic, to accommodate experience. And, in so doing, it simultaneously claims truth and produces pleasure.

Byron's anecdote is worth keeping in mind when confronting the recent flurry of narratological activity among musical critics and

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[1]Byron, *Don Juan*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 461.

analysts. As discontent with the conceptual and ideological impasses of formalist approaches to music has grown—and it has grown spectacularly in a very short time—narratological models have come to seem increasingly attractive as means of endowing untexted Euro-American art music with human content. The musical application of these models, however, has been conspicuously un-Byronic. As usual in musical studies, where the ideal of unity still retains the authority it has largely lost in literary criticism, the idea has been to totalize. As one recent essay forthrightly claims, "Studies in narratology have identified syntagmatic or combinatory structures in narrative for which parallels can be discerned in music."[2] Drawn prevailingly from literary structuralism, the models of choice have understood narrative preeminently as a source of structure rather than as a preeminent means of resisting structure. Narratology has acted as a kind of methodological halfway house in which musical meaning can be entertained without leaving the safe haven of form.[3]

This totalizing approach has met with skepticism from several quarters. In an essay that probes the limits of structuralist narratology as applied to music, Carolyn Abbate voices a "fear" that "the analogy between music and narrative . . . may be used unthinkingly to elude secret convictions that music has no meaning."[4] Pursuing the analogy further, she reaches common ground with my book *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After*, concluding that "literary theories of narrative suggest ways in which music *cannot* narrate, and how our metaphor of narration collapses and lies empty—in strange folds and

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[2]Roland Jordan and Emma Kafalenos, "The Double Trajectory: Ambiguity in Brahms and Henry James," *Nineteenth-Century Music* 13 (1989): 132.

[3]A recent article by Joseph C. Kraus, "Tonal Plan and Narrative Plot in Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5 in E Minor," *Music Theory Spectrum* 13/1 (1991): 21-47, can be taken to epitomize this trend. Of undoubted technical interest, the essay hobbles itself hermeneutically by its admitted anxiety over "emotive descriptions" and its presupposition that "narrative structure" is correlative to the articulation/perception of the work as a "unified whole."

[4]Carolyn Abbate, "What the Sorcerer Said," *Nineteenth-Century Music* 12 (1989): 222.

curves."[5] In an overview of recent work in musical narratology, Jean-Jacques Nattiez also argues compellingly (though one might demur at the word 'superfluous') that "*in itself*, and as opposed to a great many linguistic utterances, music is not a narrative and that any description of its formal structures in terms of narrativity is nothing but superfluous metaphor."[6] At best, Nattiez suggests, music "has the semiological capacity of imitating the allure of a narrative, a narrative style or mode" that historical hermeneutics may connect to "[the] reservoir of philosophical, ideological and cultural *traits* characteristic of a particular epoch" (pp. 253, 250).

If these arguments are right, as I believe they are, then any theory of the relationship between music and narrative must start with the cardinal fact that music can neither be nor perform a narrative. In the strictest sense, there can be no musical narratology. At the same time, the theory must assume that music is not limited to the function assigned by Nattiez and Abbate of imitating narrative modes. If such imitation is really a semiological capacity, then the protean, inveterately ramifying character of signification all but guarantees that other capacities are also in play. True to my title, I propose to identify three of those other capacities, each of which corresponds to a different element of the narrative situation generally conceived. The terms chosen for these elements—narrative, narrativity, and narratography—suggest my intention to short-circuit the notion of narrative structure in order to clarify narrative as a mode of performance.

Definitions first. Commonsensically enough, a *narrative* is an acknowledged story, whether typical (an abstract sequence of events repeatedly and variously concretized within a given historical frame) or individual (one of the concretizations). *Narrativity* is the dynamic

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[5]Abbate, "Sorcerer," 228; Lawrence Kramer, *Music and Poetry: The Nineteenth Century and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 7, 10-11.

[6]Jean-Jacques Nattiez, "Can One Speak of Narrativity in Music?" *Journal of the Royal Musicological Association* 115/1 (1990): 257.

principle, the teleological impulse, that governs a large ensemble of all narratives, up to and including the (imaginary) ensemble of all narratives. Narrativity is the impetus that powers (what counts culturally as) narrative itself. Finally, *narratography* is the practice of writing through which narrative and narrativity are actualized, the discursive performance through which stories actually get told. Narratography can be said to govern two broad areas of representation: the temporal disposition of events within and between narratives on the one hand, and the sources of narrative information—from narrators, characters, fictional documents, authorial agency—on the other.[7]

And the semiological capacities of music in relation to these elements of narrative? In relation to a narrative, music is a supplement, in the deconstructive sense of the term. In relation to narrativity, music is a performative, in the sense of the term developed by speech-act theory. And in relation to narratography, music is something like an embodied critique of discursive authority. It will prove convenient to take up these relationships last to first.

The most important characteristic of narratography, and the one most often forgotten in musical applications, is that it is not only the vehicle of narrative and narrativity but also—more so—their antagonist. Narratography can be understood as a principled means of resistance to continuity and closure. As the literary theorist J. Hillis Miller suggests,

> Each story and each repetition or variation of it leaves some uncertainty or contains some loose end unraveling in effect, according to an implacable law that is not so much psychological or social as linguistic. This necessary incompletion means that no story fulfills perfectly, once and for all, its [cultural] function of ordering and confirming.

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[7]For a fuller discussion of the representational areas involved in narratography and their relation to music, see my *Music as Cultural Practice: 1800-1900* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 184-89.

> And so we need another story, and then another, and yet another.[8]

We may choose to give more weight to social and psychological motives than Miller does. In particular, we can, whether as writers or readers, utilize the destabilizing effects of narratography to resist too much "ordering and confirming"—to counter ideological suasions with critical intelligence.

Musical narratography is no less subversive than its textual counterpart, though it is less pervasive. As I have argued in detail elsewhere, narratographic effects are hard to produce in music, and they reward the work that produces them by destabilizing, in terms at once formal, esthetic, and ideological, the musical order of things. (Carolyn Abbate has made a parallel argument for scenes of narrative in opera.)[9] From one standpoint, this difficulty and instability are reciprocals of each other. Since music as a medium depends, at least locally, on enhanced forms of continuity—the musical processes of ordering and confirming—music can produce narratographic effects only in relationship to strategies of principled disruption: either as those strategies themselves, or, reactively, as strategies of containment. This is not to say, of course, that all musical disruptions and recuperations have narratographic value. To speak credibly of narratography in music we need to relate musical processes to specific, historically pertinent writing practices. The same holds for narrative and narrativity: music enters the narrative situation only in relation to textuality, even when the music itself overtly lacks a text. The salient claim, then, is that music becomes *narratographically* disruptive when it seeks to jeopardize (or unwittingly jeopardizes) the dominant regimes (or what it fictitiously represents as the dominant regimes) of musical composition and reception. To use Nattiez's terms, music provokes us

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[8]"Narrative," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentriccia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 72.

[9]Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice*, 186-89; Abbate, "Erik's Dream and Tannhauser's Journey," in *Reading Opera*, ed. Arthur Groos and Roger Parker (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 129-67.

to the narrative metaphor precisely when it seems to be undercutting its own foundations.

For an exemplary glimpse of narratography at work, we can turn, but with a certain demurral, to Anthony Newcomb's essay "Schumann and Late Eighteenth-Century Narrative Strategies," the critical text that has done more than any other to stimulate the discussion of music and narrative.[10] Writing of Robert Schumann's *Carnaval*, Newcomb adverts to its famous pitch cells, which constitute anagrams on the musical letters of Schumann's name. He suggests persuasively that the recurrence of these cells throughout the otherwise motley collection of miniatures reproduces a narrative strategy "beloved of Jean Paul [Richter] and [Friedrich] Schlegel." The strategy at hand depends on what these authors called *Witz*, which Newcomb defines as the faculty of discovering underlying connections in a surface of apparent incoherence. *Carnaval*, Newcomb writes, "applies this technique to the musical analogy to the Romantic fragment. A series of musical fragments is held together by framing narrative devices and by the buried interconnections of *Witz*" (p. 170). And it is precisely these interconnections that make Schumann's "structural method" in *Carnaval* "truly original" and "more than just titillating" (p. 169).[11]

Here as throughout his essay, Newcomb's critical practice is totalizing; it produces insight by bidding up the value of organization and coherence in the musical work. Problematical in any context, this practice is especially problematical when it is applied recuperatively, that is, used to install a latent order amid manifest disorder. Carnival, Schumann's guiding idea, does not suggest buried interconnections; it suggests flagrant anarchy. We should at least question, as Schumann may have questioned and Schlegel certainly did, the assumption that "witty" repetition constitutes a unifying force.

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[10]*Nineteenth-Century Music* 11 (1987): 164-74.

[11]For a musical application of *Witz* that differs somewhat from Newcomb's, see John Daverio, "Schumanns 'In Legendenton' and Friedrich Schlegel's *Arabesque*," *Nineteenth-Century Music* 11 (1987): 150-63.

Schlegel's remarks on esthetics tend to be framed rhetorically rather than conceptually; they do not presuppose a hierarchical schema in which chaos is mediated by structure, but a figurative (usually chiasmatic) schema in which chaos is structural, structure chaotic. "It is equally deadly," he claims, "for the mind to have a system or to have none. Therefore it will have to decide to combine both" (*Atheneum Fragment* 53).[12] True to the spirit of this aphorism, Schlegel's *Witz* is a deliberately baffling hybrid. On the one hand, it represents a gregarious sociability translated into conceptual terms; it is "absolutely sociable spirit or aphoristic genius" (*Lyceum Fragment* 9). On the other hand, it is a violent centripetal force, "an explosion of the compound spirit" (*Lyceum Fragment* 90); witty inspiration occurs when "the friction of free sociability" working on the "saturated" imagination suddenly produces a "dissolution of spiritual substances that . . . must have been most intimately intermingled" (*Lyceum Fragment* 90).

If *Witz* is really at work in *Carnaval*, then, we need to recognize it, not as the principle that binds the unruly collection into a formal whole, but as the force that arbitrarily breaks down a prior musical whole—an unheard, imaginatively "saturated" inspiration—into individuated musical aphorisms. Our critical approach should subordinate the invariant pitch-content of Schumann's motivic cells to their role in leading a motley parade of expressive variations. Hermeneutic attention should go to the shape-changes that occur as one thematic realization of the cells follows another, and to the figure-ground ambiguity posed whenever a thematic realization merges into a larger melodic phrase. Our critical practice should also be energized by the anagrammatical aspect of the cells, a quality both arbitrary and festive that may well extend to other, apparently more highminded forms of structural continuity within the cycle. Schumann's version of *Witz*, indeed, may turn out to have retransposed Schlegel's version from intellectual to cultural and material sociability; it may function as

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[12]Friedrich Schlegel, *Dialogue on Poetry and Literary Aphorisms*, trans. Ernst Behler and Roman Struc (University Park: Penn State University Press, 1968). Subsequent quotations draw on the same source.

the sign of a transgressive social energy that both criticism and performance can choose either to further or retard.

Narrativity is the next item on our agenda, and here we encounter the use of narrative as a vehicle for both acculturation and resistance to acculturation. By regulating the underlying dynamics of the stories it encourages, mandates, or prohibits, a cultural regime perpetuates itself in at least two ways. First, it prescribes an array of normative character-types for its members. Second, it places the prescribed types, each assigned its own mode of subjectivity and range of action, within comprehensive networks of power and knowledge.[13] In relation to the narrativity that impels them, sometimes conceived of as a latent master-narrative, the stories themselves function along the lines of what J. L. Austin called performative utterances; they *do* something (or fail to do something) in being told. In this case, what the stories do—or fail to do, sometimes wittingly—is the cultural work of modeling, of symbolically enacting and enforcing, the process of prescription and placement, or what Miller calls ordering and confirming.[14]

Musical narrativity is still a little-explored topic. On two occasions, however, I have been prompted to outline a model of narrativity, based mainly on knowledge networks, that might be salient to music. The first model is derived from the work of Frank Kermode

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[13]As their language suggests, these formulations are indebted to Michel Foucault; see especially his *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1977), and "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry* 8 (1982): 777-85 (English in original), 785-95 (trans. Leslie Sawyer).

[14]J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962); Miller, "Narrative," 72. Frederic Jameson's Marxist account of how narratives function ideologically, both constituting and concealing themselves as imaginary resolutions to real contradictions in specific social formations, can also be taken as a theory of what I am calling narrativity. Though meant to accommodate resistance as well as compliance to dominant ideologies, Jameson's theory is inflected by a pessimism that leads it to privilege compliance. See the essay "Magical Narratives" in Jameson's *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 103-150.

and brought to bear on Brahm's Intermezzo in B minor, Op. 119, no. 1. It constructs a narrativity that seeks to impart human significance to the uncertain interval between beginnings and endings. Narrativity from this standpoint is a defensive effort to prevent the always indeterminate middle interval from emptying itself out to become (or reveal itself as) arbitrary or mechanical. The second model, poststructuralist in inspiration and alert to the involvement of power networks, is directed to Beethoven's "La Malinconia," the Finale to the String Quartet in B-flat major, Op. 18, no. 6. It constructs a narrativity that seeks to define and inhabit the gap between knowledge and belief, certainty and surmise, identity and difference. From this standpoint, narrativity may emerge either as the impulse to close the epistemic gap, or as the countervailing impulse to prevent the gap from closing.[15]

With regard to power networks, Susan McClary has utilized feminist models of narrativity to argue that music since the seventeenth century has been regularly engaged in the cultural work of constructing gender identities and the ideological work of enforcing them. Feminist theorists, notably Teresa de Lauretis, have shown that Western narrative typically models the efforts of a masculine protagonist to gain cultural entitlement. To win that entitlement, the protagonist must confront and master a feminine antagonist who sometimes appears as a person and sometimes as a space or condition culturally encoded as feminine. (Power here maps onto knowledge when rationality becomes the vehicle of mastery.) McClary shows how the dynamics of tonal composition, especially in big public genres like nineteenth-century symphony and opera, can be read against this master-narrative, whether in compliance, contestation, or a mixture of both.[16]

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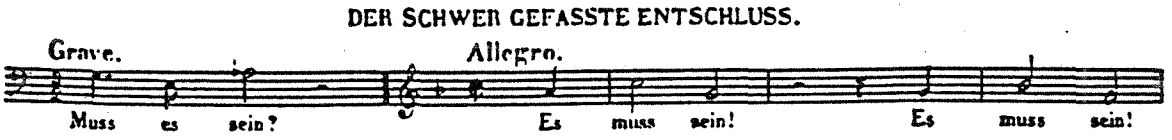
[15]For the first model, see my "Dangerous Liaisons: The Literary Text in Musical Criticism," *Nineteenth-Century Music* 13 (1989), 159-67. For the second model, see *Music as Cultural Practice*, 182-203.

[16]Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), esp. 3-79; Teresa de Lauretis, "Desire in Narrative," *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 103-57.

The Finale of Beethoven's last string quartet (Op. 135 in F major) offers a ready illustration of musical narrativity. The narrative element of this music has always been recognized; Beethoven insisted on it. The movement is famously entitled *Der Schwer Gefasste Entschluss* (*The Hard-Won Resolution*) and prefaced by a matched pair of verbal and musical mottos: *Muss es sein?* (Must it be?) inscribed under a short chromatic motive and *Es muss sein!* (It must be!) inscribed under the first motive's diatonicized inversion (Example 1). The *Muss es sein?* motive rules the *Grave* introduction, which recurs, varied and extended, to preface the recapitulation; the *Es muss sein!* motive gives both the exposition and recapitulation their start.

Example 1.



Critics have differed over how seriously to take the "hard-won resolution," the *Grave* sections striking some as fervid and others as parodistic.[17] But in one respect, at least, the resolution is plainly a sham, if not a skam. True to its type, the *Grave* introduction forms an extended upbeat on the dominant, apparently anticipating a structural downbeat on the tonic at the point where the *Allegro* starts and *Es muss sein!* replaces *Muss es sein?*. That is not what happens. The exchange of melodic motives occurs on schedule, but the harmony lags behind; the *Allegro* begins on the dominant and scurries to the subdominant as fast as it can get there. The same thing happens later when the second *Grave* introduces the recapitulation, although here the obligatory tonic hastens to make a *pro forma* appearance in the middle of the fourth bar. Mapped onto our first model of narrativity, these events show the dominant becoming disoriented, directionless, emptying itself out as a

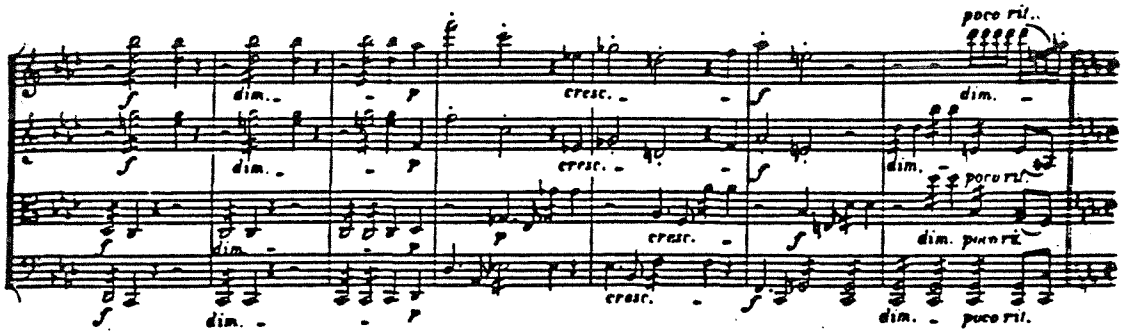
[17]For discussion see Joseph Kerman, *The Beethoven Quartets* (New York: Knopf, 1966), 362-67.

passageway to the tonic. The result is to make Beethoven's hard-won resolution seem a bit overwrought, too narcissistic to be a parody and too capricious to be taken straight. It would seem to follow that any narrative impetus in the music would be aimed at refreshing the sense of resolution by somehow replenishing dominant-to-tonic movement as the means of formal articulation on the largest scale.

And so it is. The replenishment evolves from a dialectical process in which the *Es muss sein!* motive gradually assimilates itself to the musical character of *Muss es sein?*. The process begins in the second *Grave* and concludes in yet another introductory (or transitional) passage, this one set between the recapitulation and coda.

Near the end of the second *Grave*, the *Es muss sein!* motive embraces the tempo of *Muss es sein?* and engages with it contrapuntally and antiphonally (Example 2). The motivic interplay proves to be transformative. The *Muss es sein?* motive appears in several new forms, all of them lacking its characteristic closing interval of a diminished fourth; the cello harps on one of these, while the viola invents a series of extravagant variants—they are more like contortions—that close on wide leaps. Punctuated by tremolos, this mixture of insistence and dynamism exerts a strong dialectical attraction. The *Es muss sein!* motive responds by taking a chromatic turn in the second and third of its three statements, exchanging its characteristic closing interval of a perfect fourth for the diminished fourth that *Muss es sein?*

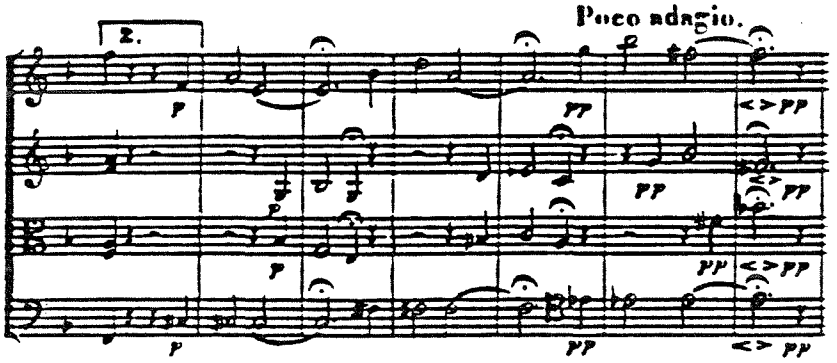
Example 2. Beethoven, String Quartet in F Major, Op. 135. Finale: end of second *Grave* section.



has left hanging.[18] Harmonically, however, the two motives remain at odds, *Es muss sein!* proposing diatonic triads and *Muss es sein?* countering antiphonally with diminished ones.

The dialectic continues after overlapping statements of the *Es muss sein!* motive, in vigorous tonic-dominant harmony, to close the recapitulation with a rock-solid cadence that feints at ending the whole piece on its own. The rhythmic energy of the motive, however, carries the music onto strange new terrain. Catching at fermatas and eventually dropping in tempo to *Poco Adagio* (not to *Grave*, true, but in context, close enough), the *Es muss sein!* motive goes on sounding, reverberant, transforming itself quietly, lyrically, pensively. More overlapping statements twice settle into chromatic harmonizations, then come to rest through another diminished fourth on a lingering E-flat minor triad (Example 3). In this way the dialectical circle closes. Poignantly combining the chromatic shape it embraced in the second *Grave* with the chromatic harmony it embraces here, the formerly declarative *Es muss sein!* motive yields itself fully to the character of the questioning *Muss es sein?*

Example 3. Beethoven, String Quartet in F Major, Op. 135. Finale: "introduction" to Coda.



[18]It is worth noting that this intervallic exchange, in which the diminished fourth replaces the perfect fourth, reverses an importantly situated earlier exchange. The development begins with four unison statements of *Es muss sein!*, the first time with diminished fourth, thereafter with perfect fourth.

In so yielding, as Christopher Reynolds has suggested, *Es muss sein!* becomes a literal acknowledgement that what any German musician would call *Es*, the sonority of E-flat, must be.[19] Unstable in the home key of F major, *Es* has acted as a sore note throughout the quartet as a whole; the finale seeks a reckoning with it. The dialectic between *Muss es sein?* and *Es muss sein!* takes *Es*, in the form of E-flat minor, as both its origin (m. 4, bt. 3—m. 5, bt. 1, Example 2) and its end. The hard-won resolution is, it turns out, the willing enhancement of a dissonance. Structurally as well as expressively, the resolution proves to be an act, not of self-assertion, but of concession, of pliancy, of resignation. And it is precisely the generative interval in which that resolution is won—won by losing—from which the coda springs forth in high spirits to prolong the tonic reached by the emphatic cadence.[20]

From the standpoint of musical structure, the passage preceding the coda is an interpolation, a patch of detail applied to the foreground. From the standpoint of narrativity, the same passage is a moment of the highest importance. To invest so much value in a nonstructural detail is, under a widely influential code, a culturally feminine gesture, and the recognition of its gender-typing offers a new window onto its narrative character.[21]

To open the window requires a shift in emphasis, along the feminist lines suggested by Susan McClary, from knowledge to power in our construction of narrativity. Given the polar opposition of the *Muss es sein?* and *Es muss sein!* motives, the yearning chromaticism of the one and vigorous diatonicism of the other readily assimilate themselves to the normative cultural polarity of feminine and mascu-

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[19]Christopher Reynolds, "The Representational Impluse in Late Beethoven, II: String Quartet in F major, Op. 135," paper presented at a symposium on music and narrative, Stanford University and the University of California at Berkeley, May 1988. On the "sore note" (below), see both Reynolds and Kerman, *Beethoven Quartets*, 356, 359, 366.

[20]On generative intervals, see my *Music and Poetry*, 87-90, 229-31.

[21]On the femininity of detail, see Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

line. If we recognize this further gender-typing, we can hear the course of Beethoven's hard-won resolution as a critique of the hegemonic master-narrative of masculine cultural entitlement. From this standpoint, the lyricizing chromatic evolution of *Es muss sein!* rests on a narrative impetus to identify with, not against, the feminine. The resolution, hard-won and soft-voiced, consists in the choice to forgo mastery in favor of desire (the chromatic expressiveness) and pleasure (the piquant coda). From this standpoint, too, the lack of harmonic opposition between the *Muss es sein?* and *Es muss sein!* motives at structural junctures becomes an opportunity rather than a problem. The lack, itself coded as feminine, becomes a pleasurable surplus. It dallies with the stern claims of the master-narrative and fosters the counter-narrative that will later be realized in the mysterious, off-center moments of affinity between the declarative and questioning motives.

The last item on our agenda, narrative proper, is at once the simplest and, in terms of music, the most problematical. To restate the cardinal point: the very premise of musical narratology is the recognition that music cannot tell stories. This defect—or virtue—is not affected by the ability of music to deploy narratographic strategies or to perform narrativistic rituals; both the strategies and the rituals are migratory, easily displaced from the venues of storytelling. Nonetheless, music since the Renaissance has been used incessantly to *accompany* stories. The usage forms a common thread among otherwise dissimilar musical genres: ballads and other narrative songs, lyrical songs with narrative elements, melodramas, operatic narratives, program music, and what might be called virtual program music, music that, like Beethoven's symphonies in the nineteenth century, compels audiences to find originary stories where the composer has left them unspecified. As an accompaniment to narrative, music assumedly does what all accompaniments do: it adds something extra. But there must be more involved than that, someone will argue. Surely the most memorable thing about the genres just listed is their music, not their narratives. And the truth in this rejoinder leads straight to the semiotic logic that joins music to narrative, namely what Jacques Derrida calls the logic of the supplement.

As Derrida notes in his book *Of Grammatology*, the term "supplement" is intriguingly ambiguous. On the one hand a supplement is an excess, a pertinent but inessential item added to something complete in itself. On the other hand a supplement is a remedy, an item called on to make good a fault or lack. For Derrida, this ambiguity poses a choice far less than it defines a rhythm, which he calls a logic. By taking on a supplement, a presumed whole puts its wholeness into question. The act of addition exposes an unacknowledged lack which the supplement is needed to counter. And in countering that lack the supplement exceeds its mandate and comes to replace the whole it was meant (not even) to repair. In his essay "The Pharmacy of Plato," Derrida shows how the account of speech and writing in Plato's dialogues is governed by the logic of the supplement. For Plato, writing is a poison (*pharmakon*), a deceptive and artifical mechanism that blights the natural immediacy of speech. But writing is also a medicine (again *pharmakon*) that cures the ills of speech, especially the inability of speech to create an archive, a storehouse of memory. Philosophy itself, Plato's highest good, depends on the dangerous drug, the supplement, of writing.[22]

Music and narrative obey the same logic of *bouleversement*: music is the supplement of narrative. Emotionally suggestive and technically arcane, music adds itself to the closed circle—apparently all self-sufficiency and self-evidence—of an acknowledged story. The result would be sheer bemusement if we were not so used to it. The narrative circle breaks; the music becomes the primary term and the story its mere accompaniment. Why bother to follow all that stuff Wotan is saying to Erda when we can just listen to the doom-laden procession of the leitmotives?

Before tracing the supplemental relationship of music to narrative in a specific piece—Schubert's song "Geistes Gruss"—I would like to dwell for a moment on its general cultural importance, as manifested in one of the most pervasive of modern musical institutions: the use of

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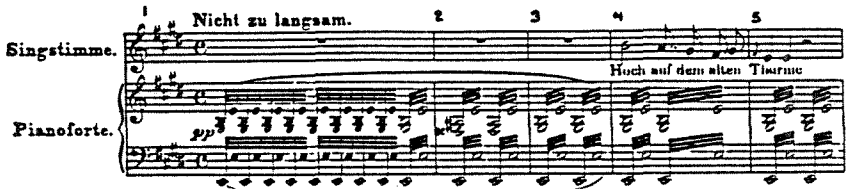
[22]Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 141-56; "Plato's Pharmacy," *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

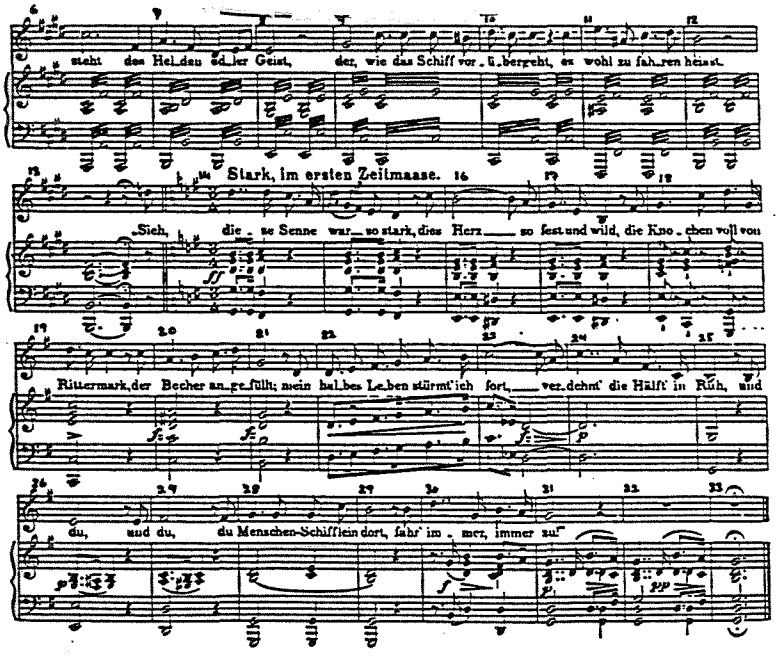
music to accompany narrative film or video. Without engaging in a full-fledged discussion, it can credibly be suggested that the music on a sound track, which we so often think of as an annoyance, a musical elbow in the ribs, is a supplement needed to remedy a medium-specific lack.[23]

The screen for both film and television is a depthless, textureless plane. Without the addition of sound, its sheer flatness can quickly alienate the spectator, deflating and distancing the projected images. Recorded speech—or, in silent movies, the use of often superfluous intertitles as speech-simulacra—supplements the images and inhibits alienation. Where speech must be minimized, in lyrical montage or narrative situations of action, suspense, or passion, music is conscripted as a further supplement. Sound-track music, even at its most banal, connects us to the spectacle on screen by invoking a dimension of depth, of interiority, borrowed from the responses of our own bodies as we listen to the insistent production of rhythms, tone colors, and changes in dynamics. (Melody, I suspect, has little importance here, except insofar as certain styles of melody may invoke cultural codes.) True, we do not, as we watch, usually experience the kind of full displacement of narrative by music so common at the opera; once our distance from the screen collapses, the rhetoric of the camera is altogether compelling. But the power of the supplement is more than evident in the rhetorical command exercised even by music that, heard out of context, would strike us as shabby or indifferent.

Example 4. Schubert, "Geistes Gruss."



[23]My comments on this topic may be taken to complement Claudia Gorbman's semiotic-psychoanalytic discussion in her *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); see esp. 1-69.



To return to specifics: Schubert's early song "Geistes Gruss," a Goethe setting, is brief, strikingly varied in texture given its brevity, and not monotonal (Example 4). Goethe's text is a lyric, not a narrative, but the lyric speaker does *quote* a narrative, part of the spirit's greeting of the title:

Hoch auf den alten Turme
Steht das Helden edler Geist,
Der, wie das Schiff vorübergeht,
Es wohl zu fahren heisst.

"Sieh, diese Senne war so stark,
Herz so fest und wild,
Die knochen voll von Rittermark,
Der Becher angefüllt;

Mein halbes Leben stürmt'ich fort,
Verdehnt' die Hälft' in Ruh',
Und du, du Menschen-Schifflein dort,
Fahr' immer, immer zu."

> [High on the ancient tower stands the hero's noble spirit, who, as the ship passes by, bids it a good voyage. "Behold, these sinews were so strong, heart so firm and wild, my bones full of knight's-marrow, my goblet brimming full; half of my life I stormed on, drew out half in rest, and you, you little ship of humanity there, voyage always, always on."]

The poem can be said to pivot on the contrast between the heroic spirit, who narrates, and the lyric speaker and voyaging listeners, who only report and receive narration. The spirit is enabled as a narrator less by his life than by his death. Coinciding with narrative closure, death permits him to represent his life as a finished pattern, a coherent whole composed of two complementary halves. His rhetoric, a quasi-chiasmus, underlines the point, joining the movement of action and repose within the enclosing halves of a life completed: halbes Leben—stürmt'—verdehnt'—die Hälft'. With the spirit as his mouthpiece, Goethe anticipates the concept of narrative voiced by the literary theorist Walter Benjamin in a classic essay, "The Storyteller":

> Death is the sanction of everything that the storyteller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death. . . . [A man] who died at thirty-five will appear to remembrance at every point in his life as a man who dies at the age of thirty-five. . . . The nature of the character in the novel cannot be presented any better than is done in this statement, which says that the "meaning" of his life is revealed only in his death.[24]

Reading from Benjamin's vantage-point, we can identify Goethe's spirit with the spirit of Narrative itself. In greeting the living, he urges them to seek the goal of the past tense, the tale told, a goal that will always be found in the distance while they live on.

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[24]From Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 94, 100-101. "The Storyteller" was written in 1936.

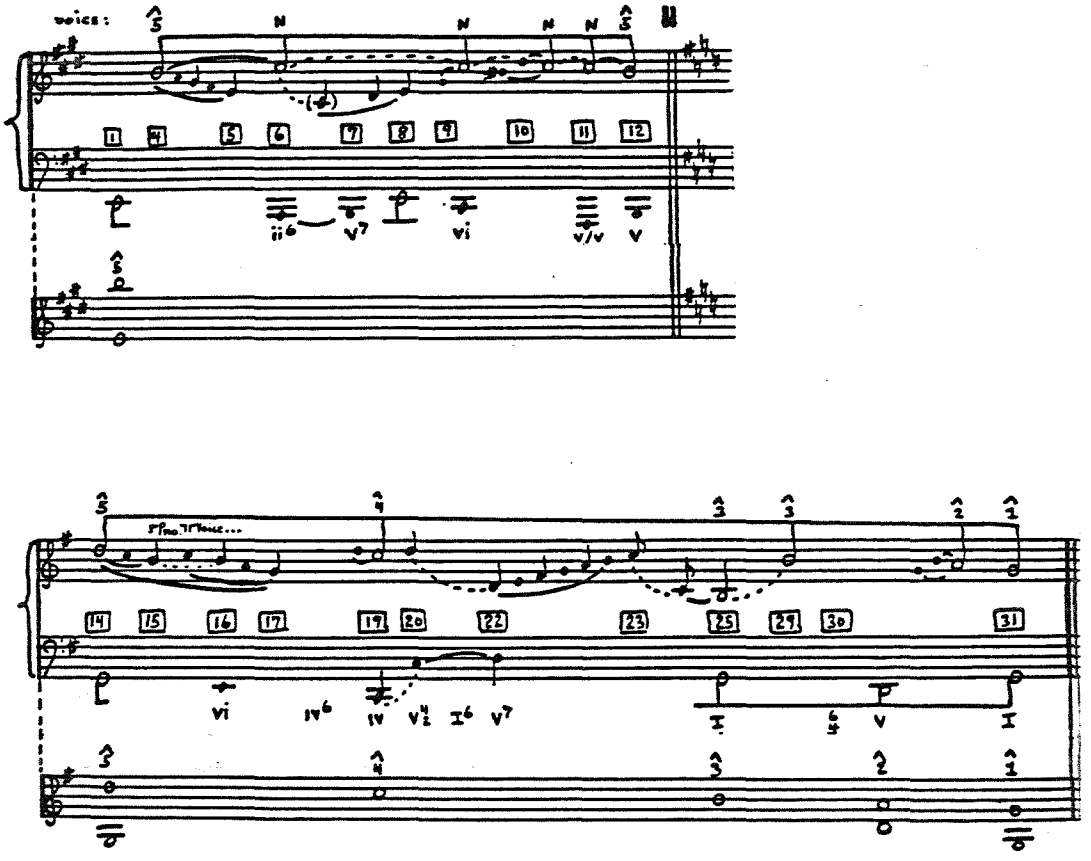
The poem, however, uses its handling of quotation to counteract this recession to the distance. The spirit's narrative, not merely the gist of the story but its very language, conforms lyrically to the stanzaic pattern set by the speaker. The spirit, indeed, exceeds the speaker in lyrical involution, rhyming his stanzas abab as against the speaker's looser abcb. The spirit narrates in and through an intensification of the speaker's lyric voice; he has no voice of his own. Given that the spirit's oracular authority depends on the restriction of narrative coherence to the dead, the speaker utilizes a rhetorical device—a form of prosopopoiea, lending the dead a voice—to appropriate that coherence and claim that authority on behalf of the living.

Schubert redresses the balance on behalf of the dead. His specific supplement to the Text, the musical representation of the speaker's and spirit's different voices, obscures and even revokes the speaker's rhetorical efforts. Schubert endows the speaker and spirit with different tonalities, E major and G major respectively, backed by different accompanimental textures, continuous tremolos versus intermittent dotted rhythms. The act of quotation occurs when the speaker's voice, with neither tonal nor textural transition, gives way to the spirit's. This rather self-abnegating form of quotation turns into a kind of dispossession, a literal re-voking of one voice by another, when the music ends in the spirit's G major instead of the speaker's E. Where the poem unites the two voices on behalf of the speaker, the song divides them on behalf of the spirit. The spirit irrevocably claims—or reclaims—the distance from the living that is proper to him, and with it his imposing oracular mantle. His music has virtually nothing in common with the speaker's except a harmonic preference for the sixth scale degree, and even this serves as a sign of the spirit's recession into the distance. When vi of G, E minor, emerges near the close of the song (m. 26), it represents the speaker's E major in attenuated form, the tonic-that-might-have-been. Its presence, coming as the spirit hails the voyagers, informs us that the speaker will not be closing his quotation. He cannot do so; he has lost his voice.

More unreservedly than Goethe, Schubert prefigures Benjamin's view of narrative; his setting of "Geistes Gruss" reaffirms that narrative addresses the living but empowers only the dead. This idea

is developed further through the handling of both cadences and melodic deep structure. The cadential technique could not be simpler. After establishing E major as the apparent tonic, the speaker's music travels through a circle-of-fifths progression to a cadence on the dominant and there breaks off (mm. 9-13). The speaker departs voicing an expectation that will never be satisfied. Tonal closure comes only in another key, another voice, when the spirit completes his narrative address with a V-I cadence in G major (mm. 30-31). A piano postlude concludes the song with two echoes of this cadence over a tonic pedal, as if the spirit's narrative and its implications were reverberating on—"immer, immer zu"—in memory.

Example 5. Schubert, "Geistes Gruss": analysis.



These cadential processes work in tandem with the deep structures shown in Example 5, an abbreviated Schenkerian graph. The speaker's music would seem to begin a fundamental line on $\hat{5}$, but the line thus begun is frozen, unable to descend; at this level the speaker's melodic action consists only of the decoration of the initial $\hat{5}$ by its upper neighbor. Ironically, the foreground vocal line begins with a phrase that consists of a complete descent from $\hat{5}$ to $\hat{1}$, as if to show what shape the fundamental line would take if only there were one (mm. 4-5, Examples 4, 5). And indeed, the fundamental line that the song eventually provides does take that very shape. But the line, of course, belongs to the spirit, not to the speaker. The living lyric voice is immobile, powerless; the dead narrative voice begins anew, on a different $\hat{5}$, and descends to its alien $\hat{1}$ with perfect aplomb.

The midpoint of this descent is especially worth noting. It occurs a little more than halfway through the spirit's section and coincides with the completion of a quasi-symmetrical foreground image of narrative complementarity. The image consists of the phrase "mein halbes Leben stürmt' ich fort" sung to a dominant scale ascending to C5, followed by the phrase "verdehnt' die Hälft' in Ruh" sung mainly to a dominant arpeggio descending from C5 (mm. 21-25). The second phrase ends with a cadence as the spirit sings "Ruh" on $\hat{3}$ of the fundamental line over a tonic octave in the bass (m. 25). With these materials Schubert issues a reciprocal pair of claims on the spirit's behalf. By using a microcosm of narrative totality to produce a root-position cadence, he makes musical closure a function of narrative authority and projects that authority forward to the cadence that ends the song. And by meshing the narrative microcosm with a major structural node, he invests narrative authority with a dynamic impetus that concretizes itself in the desire for musical closure.

With "Geistes Gruss" we come to the end of this outline of musical narratology. Of the possible conclusions to be drawn from it, the one I would single out as primary is that narrative elements in music represent, not forces of structure, but forces of meaning. That meaning may be read in terms principally social and cultural, as in the case of Beethoven's last quartet, or in terms principally epistemic and

self-reflective, as in "Geistes Gruss," or in terms that explicitly address the intersection of social, cultural, epistemic, and self-reflective formations, as in the case of Schumann's *Carnaval*. Anyone looking to narratology as a means of illuminating musical structure and musical unity had better look somewhere else. The condition of narrative, as Byron was trying to tell us, is fractious and disorderly. Structure and unity are its playthings, and its claims to truth are strongest when mixed up most bemusingly with sex and power.